

Diversion

by LJ9

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Summary: The pressure of learning to rule weighs heavily on Merida, and Hiccup helps ease the load.

Diversion

Disclaimer: I don't own any of the characters, who are property of Cressida Cowell, Dreamworks, and Disney Pixar.

For magicalbender. Thanks, dear. I hope y'all like it.

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><p>"If that's all for today, my lords?" Fergus asks, and at their nods he dismisses them. Merida waits until they've filed out to rub her eyes. All she's done today is sit, and yet she feels as drained as if she spent the day working in the fields. Worse still, she knows that even though the council is over for the day, she'll not be able to just stop thinking about their concerns. There have been problems down at the border, nighttime cattle raids into the south that have already led to skirmishes; the fighting will only escalate if they're allowed to continue. She's of two minds about it. She certainly understands why the raids happen; cattle are important to the clans, a source of food and income, and they won't stand for their cows to be taken, least of all by southerners. At the same time, her family can't be seen as encouraging the raiders, no matter how proud of them she privately feels. Then there's a legal case about an inheritance between two sons, one legitimate and one natural and each claiming their father promised him the house, and a new widow and her children pleading for justice. Merida can face down thieves and killers, those who've done wrong and deserve the consequences of their actions, but the anguish in the woman's eyes will be with her when she tries to sleep tonight.</p>

She hopes a ride before dinner will help clear her mind, at least enough for her to be able to eat. It's only when she reaches his

empty stall that she remembers she asked for Angus to be reshod, so she heads for the smithy. The horse nods in greeting, one of his feet in Sean the farrier's hands. Merida sits to watch the work, watching Sean's steady, calm manner, but the ringing of hammer on anvil from inside reminds her too much of the clash of swords, which reminds her of the problem of the raids, which sets her thinking again. She shouldn't leave the castle so soon before the evening meal, so she climbs to the gatehouse and sits staring over the forest.

Days like this make her doubt that she'll be able to hold the kingdom together. She hasn't her mother's patience and gift for diplomacy. She'd like nothing better than to just shout at the men, tell the brothers to work it out between themselves and the raiders to think beyond just revenge and the fun they must have stealing across the border by night. She'd gladly hunt down the coward who left a young woman alone with a child and another wee one on the way. The thought that she can't do any of it, that though she's the princess she is in many ways less free than her people, makes her feel sick with helplessness. A lifetime of this, of holding her tongue instead of speaking her mind and of the ceaseless work of _thinking_, will drive her mad. But she can't make her mind shut off.

She picks at her dinner, ignoring the conversation around her as her head swirls with thoughts, oblivious to her mum's increasingly worried glances. She's poking berries under their float of cream when a familiar but somewhat puzzled voice near the door says, "I didn't realize you were still eating. Excuse me."

"Don't be silly, boy," Fergus says, waving Hiccup forward. He approaches, smiling around the table, though looking as if he's not sure why he's here.

Elinor gestures to the end of their meal. "We've dessert still if you'd like some."

His smile is enough to lift her out of the fog of her thoughts. "Looks like you've got plenty if even the princess hasn't finished yet." She wrinkles her nose and mock-glare at the dig.

"You're welcome to it," she says, pushing the bowl toward him. He hesitates for just a moment before sitting beside her and digging in, fishing out all of the berries before tipping the remaining cream into his mouth. He looks up at her giggle, catching the mild disapproval on the queen's face and flushing slightly. But Merida's laughing at more than that.

"What?" he wonders, growing flustered.

"You've got a cream mustache." She reaches toward him, ready to wipe it away with her thumb, but then freezes when she realizes how close she is to touching his mouth. He's still as well, eyes caught on her face. She drops her hand abruptly, eyes following, and hands him a napkin.

In the awkward silence Elinor suggests, "Why don't the two of you go for a walk? A short one," she clarifies quickly, "and I don't want you going into the forest. You don't mind, do you, Hiccup? It's only Merida's been shut up inside all day, and I think a turn in the fresh air before bed would do her a world of good."

"I don't mind," he says slowly, as if he's just realizing something. He stands and looks down at her. "Merida?"

"Alright."

They walk through the courtyard in silence and continue out the gate. Walking is better than sitting, but it's still quiet. "Tell me a story," she requests as they round the wall.

He shoots a glance down at her. "Um, okay. What do you want to hear about?"

"I don't care." She shakes her head. "Anything, please."

So he tells the story about Berk's first holiday with the dragons. She tries to listen, to picture the village all decorated and the looks on people's faces when they realized that dragons hatch from exploding eggs, but she can't catch hold of the words. His voice, no matter how animated, becomes just more background noise to her harrying thoughts.

So lost in them is she that she doesn't realize he's stopped talking until he says, "Merida. Merida!" She stops short when he grabs her arm, a jolt running through her at the contact. The sun is setting behind her, and he's lit with a rosy orange glow; there's clear concern on his face. "What's wrong?"

Everything. The weight of the kingdom pressing down on her brain, the fear of failure creeping into her spine. Wild animals have two responses to danger, flying from it or facing it down, and though she's the daughter of the Bear King she feels like running from her troubles like a startled doe. "I've got a lot on my mind."

"I never would have guessed."

He of all people would understand, and would be happy to listen. But she doesn't want to talk. She's had words all day long; she doesn't want to listen or speak or think anymore. He'll understand that as well, the feeling of being trapped in her own body, of wanting to run a mile or dive from the cliffs and being unable to, of terrible restlessness crawling through her in conjunction with the relentless thoughts in her head. She gasps it all out, his steady hand on her shoulder now, and finishes with a plea of "Distract me. Please, Hiccup."

There's a pause in which he searches her face. She tries to breathe deeply, to center herself on the place where his hand rests, because it's the only part of her that's not ready to fly apart. "Please," she whispers again, and he does the last thing she's expecting and the only thing she needs and kisses her. Between his lips and hers there's no room for thought or doubt or worry.

"Better?" he asks breathily when they part. He doesn't move his arms from around her, though, and she doesn't try to back away.

She nods. "Better." And it is. Her mind is calmer, and though the restlessness in her limbs is still there, it's for a pleasant reason now. She takes a small step forward; he readjusts his grip, tightening his arms around her, and returns the smile she gives him. "It was a long day, though. I think I could use some more

distracting."

He readily obliges.

End
file.